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THE HABIT POISONS

FIRST PAPER

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And fear not them which kill the body, but are not able to kill the soul; but rather fear him which is able to destroy both soul and body in hell. (Matt. 10:28.)

OWING to the peculiar cerebral effects of a group of drugs, a tendency to the habitual use of these agents has become widespread and is rapidly increasing, and this in spite of the legislative enactment, and the most vigorous efforts towards the suppression of the common commerce in them. The use of these chemical bodies appeals to the most varied classes in the community, but particularly to any individual on whom the grim intensity of modern life exerts an over-powering force, driving him to seek some means of escape from himself and from those conditions which weigh upon him. These conditions are by no means confined to the material side of life, but are those over which the individual feels he has no control. It is readily appreciated that the self-poisoner is one of the less resistant, a portion of the detritus of general activity, one in whom the will power is lessened, who seeks an asylum, temporary though it may be, from those difficulties which he has not the courage to face and endure.

To no classes of the community come strains and exertions, combined with mental tension and calling for physical endurance, greater than to the physician and trained nurse. To them comes the care of others, often when the resistance is lowered and when physical energy is at a low ebb; knowing as they do the immediate effects of the habit-poisons, having immediate access to them, knowing accurately the dosage necessary to produce an effect and to avoid danger, in periods of stress, the weaker member turns to one of this group of drugs and achieves a separation from the cares which oppress and depress. That few drug habits are formed merely from curiosity or a desire for quaint sensation or from any other reason than a psychic demand for relief seems reasonable, and is borne out by the testimony of those who have become habitual poison-takers, though such evidence would seem to possess but scanty value.

The effect produced and desired by the chronic poisoner is a separation of his identity from his environment, the drawing of a veil between himself and his surroundings, a cushioning of his sensitive self against the angular shocks of his accustomed activity. In general, this may be produced in two ways, by depressing the higher centres of the brain, will, memory, judgment, and discrimination, and leaving imagination unchecked, as produced by opium and its derivatives; or by stimulating these higher centres to such an extent that the personality is centred upon their activity and the perception of the outer world decreased, the separation being thus rendered more or less complete, as is produced by cocaine. Briefly, opium is a cerebral depressant after a transitory stimulating phase, while cocaine is a true cerebral stimulant with an after-coming depression phase.

In general the habit-poisons produce two distinct effects, one that desired, the psychic effect, and the other incidental, the physical effect. As the two vary in their psychic effect, so they do in their physical changes. The chronic morphine or opium poisoner, if careful, can keep up for years a good degree of general health and nutrition and a fair capacity for work, as is evidenced by its use among the Chinese and Indian population with little apparent deterioration. The cocaine poisoner, however, is seldom well preserved. The action is quicker, more intense, nutrition is impaired, emaciation rapid, intercurrent disease and infection frequent. Though not frequent, it is not unusual to meet an opium poisoner in apparent good health, with a clear eye, good skin, fair nutrition, alert mind, who has been using opium daily for years, this condition being to superficial examination a duplication of the conditions produced by the opium as taken in the east. That this is unusual is due to the enthusiasm with which the American character embraces a good thing, and such moderate poisons are few, the usual type being a wreck, physical, mental and moral, from any standpoint from which he may be viewed. The weakening of the will by the repeated successful assaults upon it by the poison seems to be the underlying cause for all the general decay, but that will has to be a weak one at the start or the poison would have been avoided. The end result is that, though the patient may desire to stop his poisoning, he will take the most careful precautions that such endeavor on the part of himself or those caring for him shall be unsuccessful, and if under a prospect of isolation will take with him a quantity of the drug sufficient to keep him for what time he expects to be confined. When asked as to the amount taken he will state it much greater than is his habitual amount, so that he will suffer little inconvenience during the cutting-down process. The

change in the cerebral functions depends largely on the depth of the intoxication, but in general there is a progressive increase in the domination of the animal instincts, and an abrogation of the intellectual powers. With this breakdown comes a further physical deterioration until in the end there is nothing which can be called really human left, except a sneaking cleverness in the endeavors to obtain a larger and larger quantity of the poison. From the above will be seen that the truth is not in them, that there is no credence to be placed in the most solemnly-attested vows, that what is stated most earnestly is not so, and any account which they may give of themselves is a fabrication. They become inconsequential liars, and when an inconsistency of statement is pointed out, are not in the least abashed or ashamed. Having lost to a considerable extent, early in their poisonous career, the sense of time and space, there is no means of knowing how long such poisoning has been in progress and this leads to further delusions, a confusion in the procession of events and finally leads to organized delusions, under which latter influence the patient may become a positive danger to his environment. Though crimes of violence are not common to opium users, theft and all the crimes of subtlety are common, especially when the drug sought may be thus obtained.

The nature of the patient has changed early in the condition and fits of unreasoning anger, offence at imagined slights, depression from trivial cause and excitement from no reason are frequently seen. This change in the mental habit, is often the first thing to direct attention to the habit-poison victim.

The cocaine poisoner shows two phases in his downward career. The first is the stage of the periodic poison, and the second nearly continuous intoxication. In the first stage, impelled to seek relief from the above-mentioned psychic load, the cocaine habitué takes the drug in one dose or for a short time, secures his relief, undergoes the black night of after-depression, struggles with the desire for further intoxication, wins a gallant fight and stops. But not for long. Again the mental load, the psychic thrust, and the knowledge that relief is at hand gains ground against resolution, and again the drug is taken, often mixed with revolting substances or those which will produce unpleasant results, this being the last protest against the continuance of the poison, in a hope that its taking may be accompanied and followed by such phenomena as will lead to a permanent disgust for the intoxicant. This hope is vain and the periods of abstention are shortened, until the patient enters upon the phase of continuous poisoning.

The difference is readily appreciated between the two most dangerous

habit-poisons, opium shows but a transitory stimulation followed by a depression, cocaine shows a longer stimulation followed in turn by a more marked depression. It is the stimulated phase which gives to cocaine its unparalleled attractivity, which is beyond all powers of description. Suddenly uplifted to a state where mere mortals are as crawling insects, the cocaine-stimulated mind looks upon his fellow men, toiling against an adversity which he cannot appreciate. Upon his lofty seat of infinite power he directs his fate, with a high disregard for all obstacles, his mental force is capable of grappling successfully with those problems which for ages have vexed mankind, and his physical ability lifts him at a bound above all material obstacles. Floating at a superior height above his former, now grovelling companions, he recognizes the futility of their puny efforts as contrasted with the magnificent grasp and sway which he exercises over all and everything to which he may give his attention, and all the harassing details, such as pain, envy, anger, want, or jealousy disappear from his magnanimous conception of himself. Gradually the mental picture fades, the level is reached, he becomes again a man among men, harassed by the same difficulties, beset by the same anxieties, the victim of the same depressions, and injustices, and more, trooping after the usual cares come others, some real, but magnified beyond their actual import, others imagined, but none the less real to the victim, physical pains, mental distress, and a growing, insistent, unexplicit, and unexplained terror and apprehension of what he does not know. The hair of the sword of Damocles is a cable compared to the tenuous support of his impending doom, and there is no recourse, no help, no relief—but complete, utter, irretrievable ruin, mental, moral, physical awaits him, and all is lost, save cocaine. But a small amount is needed, the action is rapid, there is salvation and the intoxication continues. What would he not give to hold again that spacious seat of power and again regain that pre-eminence that by right of cocaine is his? For such an end any means are justifiable, and there is no hesitation in employing them once the dread need is upon him. Any means, however criminal, and he recognizes it as sinful, are employed with a light heart—and no human affection can stand between him and his desire. Now comes the continuous phase, and to combat that depression more and more is needed, and in spite of the quantity used a period does come in which he feels again that impending doom, is satisfied that the hand of every man is against him, doubts or even flouts the devotion of all to whom the most intimate bonds attach him, and in such condition may find plots and plans against him by those who should be his stay and comfort. Physical ills come on apace, cocaine is a general protoplasm poison—and in-

digestion, malnutrition, emaciation and intercurrent infection reduce him to a figure human in form, but with no other attributes to connect him with his species until some terminal infection removes the detritus from the path of human progression, or an organized insanity with delusions of a grandiose nature may be the end. In this stage the desire for expression may lead to the writing of the most indiscreet letters or the invention of the most astonishing accusations against some person either known or unknown.

The danger of these drugs is manifest, and their employment as therapeutic means should be surrounded by all the safeguards and the inhibitions which may be devised. Under no conditions should they be left in the house of patients for casual use. They never should be self-presented. Their administration should always be a matter of profound and painstaking deliberation on the part of the physician, and whenever possible should not be employed in any chronic or recurring disease. The use of opium to relieve pain should always be undertaken with the possibility of producing the habit active in one's mind, and the amount so small as to produce the minimum of cerebral effect. As is well known, in the presence of severe pain, there is less cerebral effect, the amount given should be so adjusted as to relieve, but not remove that pain.

Cocaine is used therapeutically to render painless minor operations, and in some cases major operations. When locally employed the amount should be such that the cerebral effect is not produced, and as the greatest individual variety exists as to the effect produced by a certain amount the least amount which will cause relative local anæsthesia employed. The most frequent cause of the cocaine habit is said to be its employment in manipulations on the nose and throat, and the ease with which effects may be produced, in this way renders its casual use dangerous in the extreme.

Occasionally a morphine habitué, if a man of extraordinary force of will and character, may recover after the habit has become established, but the cocaine poisoner almost never. There may be periods of abstinence but the mental impulse remains, and when the period of storm and stress comes, cocaine is the resource called upon. The physical condition may be improved, the man may be free from poisoning while under restraint, the physical need absent, but the psychic need remains, and when the time of ultimate necessity arrives, the poison is resorted to again. It has been said that it is easier to cure the cocaine poisoner than the morphine user, and so far as physical changes are concerned, this is quite true, but the mental insufficiency which led to the poisoning in the first place is resistant to all forms of treatment, apart from those cases where the entire mental outlook may be altered.